

A SIND LAKE

BY

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(With six plates and three Text figures)

This is the narrative of a delightful New Year week spent on the Manchar, perhaps the largest fresh water lake in India, and certainly the most enthralling from the point of view of the sportsman and ornithologist.

Situated in the Larkana District, the Manchar, like all the other numerous *dhunds* (*jheels*) of Sind, owes its existence principally to the annual inundations of the river Indus. A portion of the Indus waters reaches the Manchar by a natural and very tortuous channel known as the Western Nara, and again finds its way back to the parent river through another—the Aral. This latter commences at a point near the dusty little town of Sehwan whose chief pride at the present day lies in the dilapidated ruins of a mud-and-brick fort claiming an abstruse connection with the invasion of Alexander the Great, and in the annual fair held at the *dargah* of a *pir* long-defunct but who continues to perform his miracles notwithstanding.

The Manchar, in other words, may be regarded merely as a local expansion of the Western Nara Canal; during inundations when the level of the Indus rises much higher than that of the lake, the Aral discharges water into the Manchar; when these floods subside, the current is reversed and the water carried back to the river. A vast expanse of land—20,000 acres or more—is exposed by the post-monsoon drying or draining off of the lake which is extremely fertile and valuable for the cultivation, of *rabi* crops such as wheat and gram. It is these cultivations, incidentally, that afford attractive pasture to the innumerable hosts of geese and cranes which constitute such a salient feature of the bird-life on this wonderful lake.

Unfortunately for the bird-lover, by reason of this very fertility of the soil left high and dry by the retiring floods, the days of the Manchar as a wildfowl resort are numbered. A mammoth scheme is afoot for draining off the lake more or less completely in the cold weather so as to render the greater part of its bed available for cultivation. The disappearance of these extensive feeding grounds will doubtless produce a marked effect on the bird-life not only of the district but of the province of Sind as a whole, especially as the project is expected to come into operation simultaneously with the mighty Sukkur Barrage and its intricate network of canals, with the consequent opening up of enormous tracts of hitherto unpopulated country.

As a whole, the waters of the Manchar are shallow, ranging from a few inches in depth to eight or nine feet. The surface of the marginal

shallows is covered with tangles of the floating lotus plant (chiefly *Nymphaea lotus* and *Nelumbium speciosum*) which grow in unbounded profusion in every *dhund* in Sind. These in the Manchar yield a considerable revenue to Government. The roots of both, called *Lorh* and *Beeh* are extensively used as food, as a substitute for potatoes and in many other forms—whilst their seeds or nuts (*Nápo* and *Pábáro*) are also much eaten and sold in the bazaars.

Apart from these littoral lotus tangles, the shallows abound in reeds and sedges affording ideal shelter to countless myriads of wildfowl of every description which, driven by the bitter cold and scarcity of food from their northern homes, migrate southwards and find an agreeable haven in their hospitable seclusion.

We were encamped in the District Local Board bungalow at Shah Hassan, a tiny village on the western shore of the Manchar, between its waters and the desolate looking Kirthar Range which forms the natural boundary between Sind and Baluchistan. The road to Shah Hassan from our last camp ran for a good way by the margin of the lake, and all along in the distance could be descried millions of waterfowl, floating on the water lumped together, looking like immense floating islands, while the terrific honking, quacking and 'spattering' set up by the birds sounded like the distant grind of some weird machinery. Every now and again there passed over or in front of us within distinguishing range, flocks of various species of duck, and skeins of Grey Lag Geese leisurely winging their way lakewards from the direction of the Kirthar where they retire nightly to feed on the beloved grit which the hills supply.

A chronicle of one of these memorable days spent on the lake will suffice as sample.

We left the bungalow soon after daybreak in punts, each punt manned by one gun, a shikari and three *mohanas* with poles. The *mohanas* or 'mirbahrs' (literally 'sea-lords' or 'Admirals'!) are Mohomedans of what one may call an amphibious species. They spend their lives on or near the River Indus or one of the numerous *dhunds* created by its monsoon inundations, and eke out a bare livelihood by plying boats, gathering lotus seeds and roots, fishing and capturing wildfowl in a number of ingenious ways, some of which are hereafter described. Some of the more enterprising ones also go in for farming egrets, an industry which holds much promise when the traffic in plumes is legalized. Fatigue is a thing unknown to these 'sea-lords' and it is remarkable how they will go on punting almost incessantly all day without exhibiting any symptoms of it.

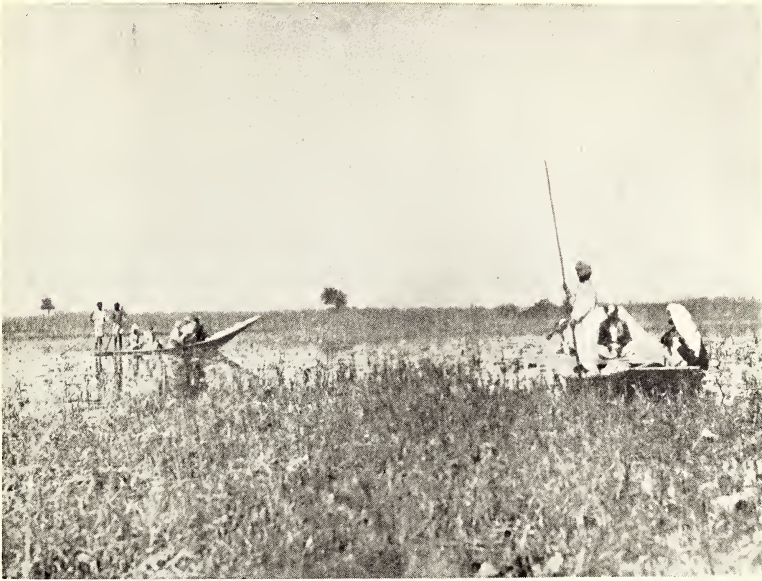
We glide placidly over the limpid waters in the direction of the butts that have been prepared overnight in the neighbourhood of a bank where Grey Lag Geese have been observed to congregate in the mornings before repairing to their favourite feeding grounds among the tender gram and wheat fields hard by the margin of the lake. A piercing north-easterly wind is blowing which strikes our faces like needles, and pierces through great-coat, tweed jacket, and thick Jaeger vest to the very marrow of our bones. We sit on the bow of our punt with our heads snugly buried to the ears in the collar of the trusty great-coat and our hands thrust well down its grateful pockets. In our course, we disperse immense flocks of

coots, with which are mingled odd parties of gadwall and other species of duck. The Manchar is, and has long been, notorious for the masses of coots it harbours, but their numbers are totally inconceivable until you actually see them and can believe your eyes. Great patches of the lake are literally blackened with their multitudes and their 'spattering' on the water as they attempt to rise, is positively bewildering to the new arrival. In spite, however, of the wholesale slaughter and destruction that proceeds apace from the time the coots arrive till their return migration at the commencement of the hot weather, their numbers appear to remain unaffected, and the legions that visit the country again the following season show that the coot is one of those fortunate species that is in some way exceptionally well-fitted in the struggle for existence, and stands in no immediate danger of extinction.

But to continue with our narrative. Owing to exceptionally heavy inundations of recent years, the greater part of the thicker reed-beds on the Manchar which erstwhile provided such admirable cover to the sportsman have disappeared, rendering satisfactory sport none too simple a proposition. The butts or 'hides' in the present instance consisted of a few twigs of tamarisk thrust into the lake-bed to conceal the punts, there being no natural cover at hand. These were arranged in a row at distances of 40 yards or more from each other. We soon take up our positions, and at a given signal the drive commences. Some of the punts have gone ahead to round off the birds, while others are stationed at a distance in the rear to turn the birds back over the guns. The first to take alarm are a party of Pintails—all males keeping together. They fly low and unsuspectingly over the central 'hide' from where the right rings out, followed by the left in quick succession. These are accommodately responded to by splashy thuds as two of the fat birds pay the penalty of blissful ignorance. The flock breaks up to right and left at lightning speed, and the birds lose no time in rising well out of range.

The reports of the gun rouse the other habitués of the lake into action and now follows a sight that can never be forgotten—a sight that must leave an indelible impress on the mind of every sportsman who shoots on the Manchar. The birds rise in their thousands to the accompaniment of a veritable babel of flapping, swishing, spattering, honks, quacks and a variety of other noises. Now come the pochards and the shovellers, spotbills, mallard and teal all in a jumble, some swishing past in orderly flocks overhead, others flying singly or in twos and threes. The clouds of mixed species that rise, soon resolve themselves into little parties of their own. Unfortunately the wind keeps up and spoils the fun. The birds get steadily higher and higher and are soon quite out of range. Our gunners have been feverishly active all this while, and the firing has been fast and furious. The average of kills however, dwindles off appallingly after the first few fusilades, and in the later stages of the shoot the sportsman has to rely more upon his luck than on his skill.

In a very short time the birds have disappeared. The firing now becomes sporadic and far between as an occasional mallard or white-eye returns blundering past to reconnoitre ground so lately



1. NEGOTIATING THE REEDY MARGINAL SHALLOWS.



2. NEARING THE BUTTS.
(Note masses of wildfowl in the background).



3. THE FOWLERS LEAVING THE PUNT.



4. THE FOWLERS ABOUT TO ENTER A FLOCK.

evacuated. Very good sport may sometimes be had at this stage, as the gunner need be in no hurry, and the tendency to 'brown' flocks, which is perhaps the most important cause that contributes towards unsatisfactory averages, is eliminated.

None of the Grey Lag Geese which formed such an imposing array on the mud-banks in our front have come our way during the drive except a pair, of which one fell and the other was disgracefully missed. During operations, a great many skeins have been noticed flying over, well out of range, in the direction of the young wheat and gram on the farther margin of the lake. The masses that rose at the first shot have also made a bee-line for these parts. A hasty confab of the shikaries decides that our acquaintance with the birds might be renewed with advantage, and we push off. All the way in the punts, flock upon flock of the geese are observed leisurely winging their way towards their rendezvous flying studiously out of range and frankly disdainful of our murderous aspirations. Notwithstanding the obvious, the more enthusiastic section of our party have been totally incapable of restraining the trigger-finger. On the universally accepted and sound principle that accidents *will* happen in the best regulated households, the Mannlichers are brought into action, but magazine after magazine has failed to disturb the complacency of the assaulted, who doubtless regard it all as a rather meaningless and totally unnecessary demonstration on the part of the human biped.

True, one 'accident' did happen. A stray bullet caught the leader of a wedge plumb in the centre of his fat body blowing his back completely away, and the bird arrested dead in his flight as if by a stroke of heart failure, hurtling down like a stone through 500 feet or more of space presented a remarkable spectacle. This event of course roused hopes which conduced to dissipate ammunition in the shortest possible time!

In an hour we are on the farther shore. Punts are discarded and a rigorous tramp of about three miles over slushy ground brings us within reach of our objective. By the time we arrive at our destination it is 10.30. The distant fields, as far as the eye can reach, are one seething mass of jostling Grey Lags, but the total absence of suitable cover presents a problem. The shikaries however are up to the game. They put their heads together and we soon find ourselves hustled along to within a few hundred yards of the birds—now crouching, now crawling on all fours, now halting motionless then again running cautiously forward taking the fullest advantage of every unevenness the ground offers. Here we are made to squat behind diminutive tussocks of grass in ankle-deep water, all in a line at intervals of a hundred yards or so. The beaters who have gone ahead in the opposite direction, seeing us safely ensconced, commence walking towards the birds. The foremost to scent trouble are the odd parties feeding on the outskirts who rise, as often as not to settle again after circling the fields. When the men have managed to edge themselves more or less into the centre of the congregation, the shout is raised. The sight that now ensues completely baffles description. Momentarily your horizon is obscured by dense masses of Grey Lag Geese and the din of their honking is

such as to render the various excited injunctions of your shikari positively inaudible. The birds spread themselves over a vast front. The guns have been placed directly in their line of retreat to the lake, and you presently see a few thousands coming your way. You crouch and prepare to send up your greetings, cylinder and choke, but before you have been able to gauge the range, the great multitude have swept over, and now come smaller skeins which happily are flying lower. You hear shots from your neighbours and occasional heavy splashes in response. The birds swerve to right or left, but before they can rise much higher they are directly over you. If you remain cool and collected and pick out your birds before firing, a couple of rights and lefts will bring you two brace without difficulty. If ambitiously inclined, however, and aspiring to a record bag by 'browning' the flock, you will as likely as not be left cursing your stars with a clear blue sky above and precious little to compensate for it in the nature of birds in hand!

This briefly is the typical programme of a day's shooting on the Manchar, which with sundry variations may be experienced by all sportsmen who shoot on the lake.

A couple of days were spent in watching the wildfowl netting and fishing operations of the mohanas, which proved both enjoyable and instructive.

The flesh of the coot, though somewhat rank and fishy to 'sophisticated' palates is held at a premium by the Sindhi, especially of the poorer classes. He prefers it to duck and other wildfowl, and the coot accordingly is a coveted object of the mohana's attentions and devices.

There are numerous little villages and hamlets by the shores of the Manchar and most of the larger *dhunds* in Sind, the inhabitants of which subsist throughout the cold weather months either on the flesh of this unfortunate bird or otherwise by the wherewithal provided by traffic therein. In the neighbourhood of every such village may be seen masses of coots' feathers which bespeak the sad fate of the many gone before. Coots sell in the villages at about two annas a piece, and owing to their ready demand, bring brisk business to the fowler. A very common method of capturing the birds is for a man to wade into the shallows frequented by the coots, wearing on his head in the form of a cap, the complete skin of a duck with head and neck properly set up, and provided with breathing and eye-holes for the fowler. Under cover of this deception he stalks gradually up right into the midst of an unsuspecting flock, nothing visible except the harmless looking decoy on his head. When well within the assembly, the fell work commences. A bird is grabbed by the leg under water and in the twinkling of an eye, before it has time to flutter, the victim disappears below the surface. Its legs are bound up with water weeds and the captive firmly secured to a belt round the fowler's waist. The other members of the flock have noticed nothing of this foul treachery, and are as confiding as before. Presently a second bird disappears, a third follows rapidly, and then a fourth. Shrewd suspicions now begin to cross the minds of the silly coots and misgivings become apparent as to things being as they should; there is certainly something



5. A SUCCESSFUL CATCH.



6. THE *Gazis* IN ACTION.



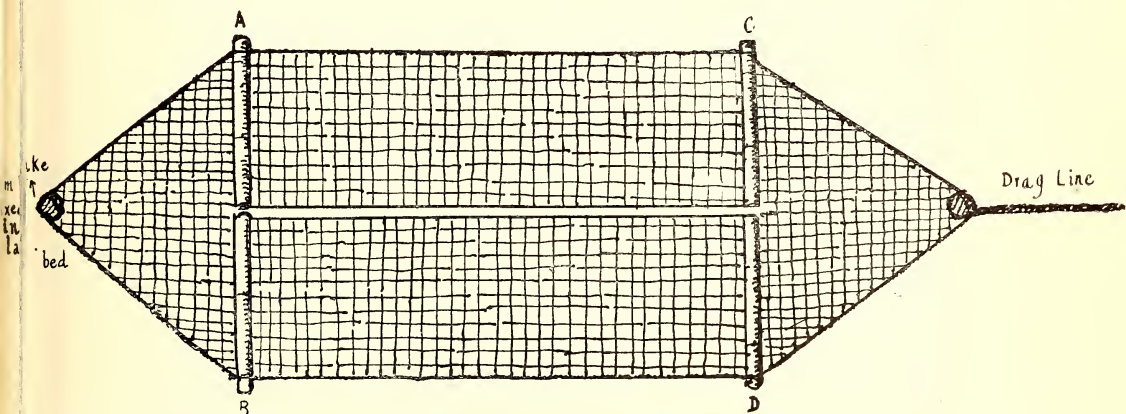
7. RED-CRESTED POCHARDS IN A *Dhubbi* NET.



8. REMOVAL OF CAPTIVES FROM *Dhubbi*.

wrong somewhere! A number of the birds spatter away some distance from this mysterious duck, but are too dense however to detect that unlike other self-respecting ducks, this one of their suspicions that follows steadily, progresses backwards or sideways! The eye- and breathe-holes for the fowler are placed near the vent and undertail coverts of the skin, so that the decoy and the man below are facing in opposite directions! When the fowler has gathered half a dozen birds or so below the water, he fastens their legs together and moving off some distance from the flock, he allows his ring of captives to come to the surface for breath. It not infrequently happens that when sport is good and the fowler ambitious, some delay occurs in this very necessary operation with the result that several of the hapless prisoners are drowned. Leaving the knot of captured birds on the water, the wily mohana again sidles into the flock and the process is repeated. Thus it is not unusual for twenty or thirty birds to be taken by a single man in the course of a morning's work. Duck are also taken in this manner, but the stupidity of the coot lends itself particularly to this device, and they make by far the more ready victims. By way of a variation, in place of the duck-skin cap a tame cormorant is frequently perched on the man's head, and the bird appears to participate whole-heartedly and to enjoy the sport thoroughly. This method of fowling is of great antiquity and has been pursued through the ages practically unchanged in every detail. It was greatly in vogue in the time of the Emperor Akbar.

A method of netting wildfowl on a somewhat larger scale is known as the *Dhubbi*. Here a net, about 30 feet \times 20 feet is stretched on the shallow bed of the lake at a favourite feeding ground of the birds. A quantity of grit from the neighbouring barren hills is sprinkled over the net by way of bait. A drag-line, 200 yards or more, is attached to one end of the net by the pulling of which the net closes up in the form of a Gladstone bag.



Open "Dhubbi" Net
When net closes A meets B and C meets D.

Fig. 1.

The fowler with the loose end of this line conceals himself and his punt among the reeds at a distance and keeps a vigilant look-out. While 'tipping' about for food, the presence of the grit is discovered by the birds and this marks a general scramble for the spot within the sphere of influence of the hidden net. Now is the time for the fowler to get busy: the line is pulled steadily and gradually till one final and mighty heave leaves the birds entangled. One of my photos shows thirty-five Red-crested Pochards taken in a net of this size. The fowler now approaches, and removing one captive after another, proceeds in the most matter of fact manner to interlock their wings—twisting one wing round the other over the back—and to dump the birds mercilessly into his punt prior to packing them up in crates for despatch to Karachi and other markets.

On a vaster scale, and for business on wholesale lines, the *modus operandi* of the mohanas is as follows:—

A flight-net about 12 feet high and a quarter of a mile or more in length is stretched on upright poles across a portion of the lake in the proximity of some favourite feeding ground, with due regard to direction of wind, etc. This net is turned up at the bottom, just below the water-line, to form a continuous bag running all along the lower border. A quantity of the beloved grit is dropped along the length of this net. Ducks, geese, coots and other wildfowl gather in their hundreds to feed on this spot at night, and under cover of the darkness a number of punts move up in line formation from the opposite direction collecting and driving the unconscious birds towards the net. When the punts have advanced to within thirty yards or so of this 'barrier of twine', a signal is given and a terrific uproar set up. Lighted faggots and torches are all of a sudden hurled at the birds who rise in distraction and attempt to flee in the opposite direction. Before they are able to get well under way and rise high enough to clear the cryptic net, they dash into it headlong to be thrown down fluttering into the gaping bag below, whence they are soon extracted by the mohanas who hurry forward anon. In this manner a thousand or more birds may be taken in the course of a single drive.

A rather sporting method of procuring coots for the pot is frequently indulged in by the mohanas. The gadgets employed in this sport are a powerful bow made of bamboo and a number of blunt, headless, unfeathered arrows, about three feet in length and three-quarters of an inch thick. The hunters approach a flock of coots in punts and divesting themselves of their clothing to very nearly the irreducible minimum, launch into the waist-deep water where they crouch submerged up to their chins in a row at intervals of fifteen yards or thereabouts. The punts move off to round up the birds and drive them towards the bowmen or *Gazis* as they are called. For some time the coots continue to swim away from the advancing punts and in the direction of the archers, but on being pursued closer, they attempt to rise. They spatter along the surface before taking off, and by the time they are over the line of bowmen they are scarcely higher than fifteen or twenty feet. The men who have hitherto been immersed to their chins with bow and arrow in readiness under water, suddenly pop up and discharge their



9. AN EGRET FARM ON THE MANCHAR.



10. INTERIOR OF THE SAME.